

Learning to relax

Many people find that learning to relax helps them reduce worry and anxiety. It can also help improve sleep and relieve physical symptoms caused by stress, such as headaches or stomach pains. **Learning to relax is a skill and takes practice before it can be done properly.**

You may already have learned a relaxation exercise or you may want to try a relaxation or yoga class at an adult education class or other centre near you. If not, here is a guide on how to relax. This exercise should take about 15–20 minutes; however, if you have only five minutes to spare, five minutes is better than nothing.

1. Find a quiet and relaxing place

Choose a comfortable chair where you won't be disturbed. Make sure you take the phone off the hook. You may need to explain to your family or friends what you are doing so that they do not disturb you. Telling them may also reduce any embarrassment you might feel.

2. Clear your mind

Try to clear your mind of all worries or disturbing thoughts. If these worries or thoughts drift back into your mind while you are relaxing, do not try to stop them, just let them float gently across and out of your mind without reacting to them. Let your mind be clear and calm.

3. Practice the slow breathing method

Breathe in for three seconds and breath out for three seconds, thinking the word *relax* every time you breathe out. Let your breathing flow smoothly. Imagine the tension flowing out of your body each time you breathe out.

4. Relax your muscles

For each of the muscle groups in your body, tense the muscles for 7–10 seconds, then relax for 10 seconds. Only tense your muscles moderately (not to the point of inducing pain). Don't try to relax. Simply let go of the tension in your muscles and allow them to become relaxed. Relax your muscles in the following order:

Hands — clench one fist tightly, then *relax*. Do the same with the other hand.

Lower arms — bend your hand down at the wrist, as though you were trying to touch the underside of your arm, then *relax*.

Upper arms — bend your elbows and tense your arms. Feel the tension in your upper arm, then *relax*.

Shoulders — lift your shoulders up as if trying to touch your ears with them, then *relax*.

Neck — stretch your neck gently to the left, then forward, then to the right, then to the back in a slow rolling motion, then *relax*.

Forehead and scalp — raise your eyebrows, then *relax*.

Eyes — screw up your eyes, then *relax*.

Jaw — clench your teeth (just to tighten the muscles), then *relax*.

Tongue — press your tongue against the roof of your mouth, then *relax*.

Chest — breathe in deeply to inflate your lungs, then breath out and *relax*.

Stomach — push your tummy in to tighten the muscle, then *relax*.

Upper back — pull your shoulders forward with your arms at your side, then *relax*.

Lower back — while sitting, lean your head and upper back forward, rolling your back into a smooth arc thus tensing the lower back, then *relax*.

Buttocks — tighten your buttocks, then *relax*.

Thighs — while sitting, push your feet firmly into the floor, then *relax*.

Calves — lift your toes off the ground towards your shins, then *relax*.

Feet — gently curl your toes down so that they are pressing into the floor, then *relax*.

5. Enjoy the feeling of relaxation

Take some slow breaths while you sit still for a few minutes, enjoying the feeling of relaxation.

Practice once or twice a day for at least eight weeks. During the day, try relaxing specific muscles whenever you notice that they are tense.

Recognizing tension¹

Many people find learning to relax difficult. This is because being tense has become a habit. Use the chart below to help you see where and when you get tense. Write in the situations when you've noticed different muscles becoming tense. You might have been doing something (such as shopping), or waiting to do something (such as a test). Write in what it was. Write it in next to the muscles that became tense. As you become more aware of when you get tense, add the situations to your chart. In those situations, practise parts of your relaxation routine to overcome the tension.

Breathing.....

Hands.....

Arms.....

Shoulders.....

Neck.....

Forehead.....

Jaw.....

Chest.....

Stomach.....

Back.....

Legs.....

¹ *Recognising tension* is re-printed with permission from Holdsworth N, Paxton R. *Managing anxiety and depression: a self-help guide*. Mental Health Foundation, 1999.